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AUTHOR Pardi, Marco M.
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ABSTRACT

The contention that relevance of curriculum to everyday life is of paramount importance in the educational process, and is a fundamental justification for the proliferation of the community college as an educational phenomenon, is the focus of this paper. The role of the social sciences is explored in particular. (DB)

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The Issue of Relevance in the Community College

by Marco M. Pardi

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The author is currently a Professor of Behavioral Science at Polk Junior College, Winter Haven, Florida. He received a B.A. degree in Anthropology from the Univ. of South Florida in Tampa, Florida and an M.A. degree in Anthropology from Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri.

The position developed in this paper will seek to support the contention that relevance of curriculum to everyday life is of paramount importance in the educational process and is a fundamental justification for the proliferation of the community college as an educational phenomenon.

While the issue is one which should be directed at the college as a whole, I will limit my discussion to an exploration of the role of the social sciences. It should appear that the principles exposed in such a sampling in fact represent the crux of the integrated system we call a "community college."

The author has so far found that the community college students comprise in some ways a combination of opposites. Our students share the variety of backgrounds common to university students but there are some significant differences in the distribution frequencies. For example, we have a great many students who simply would not qualify to enter a university. In addition, there are many who are returning to school after protracted absences in military duty or the first years of setting up a household. Finally, many of our students are just graduating from high school and

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experimenting with the college experience; some for self satisfaction, some to placate anxious parents.

In the latter two categories, the returnees and the experimenters, are many who are academically qualified to attend a four year institution instead of a community college. However, two main factors conspire to preclude their realization of this: finances and/or self-esteem. Most of us, as faculty, are in relatively impotent positions regarding the financial problems of our students. However, we may well turn the tide of the self-fulfilling prophecy of expected failure-hence,failure, through the calculated intervention of seeing through the normal channels of lecture, test, grade, lecture, test, grade...flow.

Intervention through one factor in this accepted flow has been attempted in several ways. The concept of grading has been dismantled, inspected, reworked, tried and labelled as failure, success, or a necessary evil. The nature and structure of tests have been subjected to much the same process, with much the same results. The concept of the lecture method of delivering information has also been attacked as inadequate and boring and in need of replacement. But, after the discussion subsides, the situation settles out to a fair approximation of what it had been prior.

Instead of wringing our hands over the present state of affairs, we may find that we can use it to our advantage. Lectures are not in and of themselves boring. They can be made so in direct proportion to their perceived irrelevance to the listener.

But, even an initial attempt on the part of the instructor to understand the reality of life for his students can bring his lectures more into a meaningful framework from their standpoint. In the social sciences this should be not just another ideal, another item on a checklist of "things to do in the classroom," but rather an all-encompassing reality.

A central problem of our educational approach, especially the lecture system, has been the tendency to wean children in their early years from the security of ignorance to the false security of "knowledge" as found in "The Book" or from "The Teacher's" golden mouth. Whether or not the dogma quoted in the text or from the teacher happens to be correct is suddenly immaterial to a student when he begins to understand that most of his education has been a process of training him to respond within very narrow limits in terms of substantive and qualitative responses. Education as a search for knowledge becomes a sham when the reality of education as the prescribed ingestion of someone else's knowledge comes home to him. Thus, the student has never graduated from the spoon feeding stage; only enlarged the capacity of his stomach. From this it would seem that the day by day, moment by moment kaliedoscopic experiences of the student as a living entity must be ruled out of bounds educationally unless they may be raised in class. As most students find early in their school careers, most experiences are not "proper" material for discussion when raised in Mrs. Brown's 1st or 2nd grade room. While it is

generally true that as one progresses through the ranks of the educational bread line one's ability to relate "outside" experiences increases, care must constantly be taken to avoid over extending oneself in the classroom explanation of these experiences to avoid being labelled as a wierdo by fellow students and teacher alike.

Thus, while the mills of the educational meal continue to force feed their quizzical inhabitants, the reserves of knowledge are held only in anticipation of test week, when they must be regurgitated in proper consistency neither over flowing the test receptacle nor leaving it partially filled. What benefits the lingering after taste bring are uncertain as the student leaves the educational environment for the cleansing sea of reality. One point has come home clearly to the student however, "Give the man what he wants. Who cares whether the anthropology and psychology professors contradict each other about instincts in man? Just keep them straight on exams, and somehow the real you will get through in spite of it all." It is unfortunately true that a large number of our students have been educated, or rather, trained to adapt to the school environment through a conditioning process built upon a history of several "But, teacher...." traumas. Those who would guard the gates of knowledge have, at times, been over zealous.

Recently, however, our zeal has led us to adopt a lexicon which may be more responsive to the demands of protesting students than we might care to admit. A term

much used today as an expression of the sumptuous feast with which we hope to lure, and assuage the student, is "smorgasbord". We have been congratulating ourselves on our ability to sample the real world and spread before the students representative servings. While it is true that we generally have had experiences both in our subject specialties and in the outside world, scrutiny of the "smorgasbord" concept of education discloses two serious drawbacks. At once, it is selective of the universe of knowledge. While this may be partially excused or glossed over through a defense built on a statement of the impossibility of presenting the universe of knowledge and validity of the sampling procedure, a second flaw provides what appears as the greatest threat to the concept. This second flaw is the possibility of isolation from the world of change. The accelerating rate of our technological change has nearly exceeded our ability to grasp it, describe it, teach it, and test the learning of it before it provides us with outlooks that change the shape of what we had just assumed was fairly stable.

Rather than presenting our educational system as a smorgasbord of interesting exotica to be used strategically in cocktail party conversation, let us concentrate more on preparing the student to conduct his life as a continuum of inquiry, understanding, further inquiry.... Such an approach would bring educational media more into line with reality by at once being more relevant to the student and, later, being

more in keeping with the realities of the educational experience as an employment passport. Thus, by giving the student, not the smorgasbord from which he is expected to stuff himself, but rather the utensils for manipulating educational foodstuffs as they occur in his life, whether at the school,home, or job; whether while a "student" or "graduate" whether today or in the unforseeable future, we answer the call for relevance. Many employers place little or no value upon the material content of the college degree of the applicant; it merely serves as evidence that the individual is trainable.

The elusive relevance our students seek today is not a new set of facts or traditions, but a nomothetic method with which they can include their lives as students and their lives as human beings into one inseparable blend. Students are becoming impatient with the view of school as limbo, a second womb. We must answer their call with an ardent devotion to the nature,not just the results, of inquiry.

We, in the community college, are in privileged positions relative to the real world community. We are able not only to reach neophytes entering into their ministry of academia,but the public at large as represented by those who come to us for so-called "non-academic" curricula.

I submit that we can no longer support this distinction as valid in the real world. Our duty to the community should be to provide it with the intellectual utensils necessary to examine not only the realms of knowledge, but life itself as it is lived by all of us.

Lest this appear as a nebulous threat to our day to day well being, I shall venture a concrete example of in-class flexibility. On a general level every professional educator is aware of the business of his art. Classes scheduled in the late afternoon, especially in the community college milieu, do not fill well unless they are required for a degree program and not offered at other, more convenient, times. As a professor of anthropology at a medium sized community college, I found myself presented with two distinct advantages for studying the behavior patterns of students: (1) only one of the three courses I teach is required in a degree program ; and,(2) I am the only anthropology instructor. The two elective courses,"Cultural Anthropology"and"Human Origins," were offered at 11:00 a.m. to noon and 1:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m. respectively for 1½ years. The cultural class never lacked for students. The Human Origins class was often close to the minimum. As a low profile test of a hypothesis of mine I switched the courses, keeping the same time blocks. In fact, I found that the enrollment for the Human Origins class was almost exactly equal to the average experienced for the Cultural Anthro classes in that time block, while the enrollment for the hitherto well attended Cultural class fell to the level appropriate to the Human Origins class. From this I could only conclude that the subject matter was nowhere near as important as the designation (Social Sciences) and the convenience of the time the class is offered. That is, students who need three credit hours in Social Science are not very "picky" once the criterion of convenient time has been satisfied.

Was this cause for heart-rending self analysis? Am I nothing more than an impersonally convenient unit to be fitted onto a registration card? Or should I harden to the callousness of the "real world" and lecture in

honor of ivy memories while passing stoic judgement on the misplaced values of today's generation? Should I bleed, or swing my educational purse under the streetlight of opportunist academia?

In fact, I decided that neither was appropriate. Instead I laid bare my findings, and my thoughts, to the classes involved and have revelled in a much more personal relationship with the lives and needs of my students. Nothing has been lost; I daresay I feel a degree of candor which has helped several of my students, and myself, to re-align the hitherto separate realities of academia and personal life-style. Circumstantially, more students may retain more "knowledge" of Cultural Anthro or Human Origins. But, and it sounds oddly mercenary, I feel much more has been gained in undefinable, non-gradable insights into the honesty which we have so often tried to formalize.

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